

Vesoul 2005

By Ron Holloway

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VESOUL INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF ASIAN CINEMAS 2005

Cineastes with an incurable ache for Asian cinema are well advised to seek a cure at Vesoul. Indeed, Asian film festivals in western countries don't get much better than this annual event in an ancient town in the Haute-Saône province in eastern France. Now in its 11th year, the Vesoul International Festival of Asian Cinemas (22 February to 1 March 2005) was founded by Martine and Jean-Marc Théouanne, a teaching couple whose love for Asian cinema stems from back-packing days in the Far East. Enthusiastically supported by the home audience, Vesoul was breaking new ground back when Asian cinema was still an exotic sidebar attraction at major international film festivals. Over the years, as the festival extended its influence all the way to Paris, committed Asian cineastes climbed on board to lend a hand with programming and scouting reports - particularly Martine Armand, the festival's artistic consultant with one foot in India and the other in France, and Max Tessier, an acknowledged expert on the cinema of the Far East. Then, when an International Jury and purse awards were added - namely, the Cyclo d'Or and the Grand Prix du Jury - Asian directors flooded the festival office with cassettes and DVDs. Today, five other equally important citations are awarded by juries from different viewing perspectives: the Prix Emile Guimet (named for the Guimet Museum of Asiatic Art in Paris), the Prix du Jury NETPAC (awarded by the Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema), the Prix Langues O' (voted by linguists specializing in Oriental languages), the Prix du Public, and the Prix Jury Jeunes.

Iranian veteran director Dariush Mehrjui headed the International Jury, joined by Indian director Anup Singh, Turkish journalist Gönül Dönmez-Colin, and French radio commentator Sophie Maraudon. Of the 62 entries from 22 countries programmed in the Cinema Club multiplex, nine films competed for the Cyclo d'Or: Hassan Yektapanah's *Dastan natamam* (*Story Undone*, Iran), Jia Zhangke's *Shijie* (*The World*, China), Liu Hao's *Hao da yi dui yang* (*Two Great Sheep*, China), Serik Apymov's *Okhotnik* (*The Hunter*, Kazakhstan), Ho Quang Minh's *Thoi xa vang* (*Elapsed Time*, Vietnam), Bui Dinh Hac's *Hanoi - 12 ngay dem* (*Hanoi - 12 Days and Nights*, Vietnam), Mario O'Hara's *Babae sa breakwater* (*The Woman of the Breakwater*, Philippines), Joseph Cedar's *Medurat hashevet* (*Campfire*, Israel), and K.M. Lo's *If God Sent His Angel* (Cambodia). The Cyclo d'Or went to Hassan Yektapanah's *Story Undone*, thus continuing a string of festival wins that began last August at Locarno (NETPAC Award) and surfaced again in February at Rotterdam (Amnesty International Award). The story of a novice filmmaker on a precarious personal venture to make a "committed" documentary about Iranian emigrants illegally trying to cross a border to Turkey (and from there presumably on to Europe), neither the green-eared filmmaker nor his slow-witted cameraman anticipate the trouble they will encounter - surprises that will eventually tip the scales towards a tragic finale.

Chinese entries made the biggest impact at Vesoul. The festival's Grand Prix du Jury went to Jia Zhangke's *The World*, previously an entry at Venice. A collection of interwoven stories - some trivial, some comic, some tragic - *The World* depicts the fantasies of attractive young stage girls from the provinces, whose dreams are mirrored in the florid appeal of the World Park itself in Beijing, a amusement park tailor-made for Jie's talent for debunking tourist attractions and questioning current mores in a consumer-oriented China. One of the leaders in the growing ranks of independent Chinese filmmakers, Jia has been a talent to watch ever since his debut feature *Xiao Wu*, about adolescent pickpockets and small-time cigarette-smugglers somewhere deep in the provinces, was awarded the prestigious Wolfgang Staudte Prize in the International Forum of New Cinema at the 1998 Berlinale. Another Forum discovery was Liu Hao, whose debut feature *Chen mo he meiting* (*Standing Up*), a bittersweet statement on the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, received a Special Mention in the Forum program at the 2002 Berlinale. Liu presented his second feature, *Two Great Sheep*, in Vesoul after a supportive launch at last year's Pusan festival. Awarded the NETPAC Prize "for its warm and honest portrayal of a community in an isolated mountainous area in which the rapport between the Chinese authorities and the disadvantaged peasants is placed in question," *Two Great Sheep* was hailed in the jury declaration as "a film of resistance."

This year's Vesoul retrospective honoured Korean director Lee Doo-yong with a Special Cyclo d'Or and an

eight-film tribute. With more than 60 films to his credit, and one of the leading directors in mainstream Korean cinema, Lee's breakthrough on the international festival scene came when his *Pee-Mak* (1980), a chilling tale of ghosts and revenge set in a remote mountain community, was invited to and critically acclaimed at the 1981 Venice festival. Another Special Cyclo d'Or was awarded to veteran Iranian stage-and-screen actor Essatollah Entezami, best remembered at Cannes for his remarkable performance in *Gav* (*The Cow*, 1969) as a poor man in a remote destitute village whose only treasure is a cow that he treats as his own child.

Among the many highlights at this year's Vesoul festival were two Asian classics: Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* (India, 1962) and Tolomush Okeev's *Bakadjyn zajyty* (*The Sky of Our Childhood*, Kyrgyzstan-USSR, 1967). On the documentary side was Nara Keo Kosal's personal revisit to his motherland while accompanying Bertrand Tavernier on his location shooting of his Cambodian production *Holy Lola* in *Au pays des sentinelles éternelles* (*In the Country of Eternal Sentinels*, Cambodia-France). Kosal also photographed French documentarist Fleur Albert's *Le silence des rizieres* (*The Silence of the Rice Fields*, France, 2004), a remarkable biographical account of French communists who sided with Ho Chi Minh in the defeat of the French forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. In this regard should also be mentioned Ho Quang Minh's *Thoi xa vang* (*Elapsed Time*, Vietnam, 2004), a rare glimpse into Vietnamese production of today. In *Elapsed Time* a family chronicle weighs history with tradition over the past decades to trace the remorse of an educated teacher who must bow to the will of the friends in the Party rather than follow his own heart and marry the woman he loves. *Elapsed Time* was awarded the Prix Emile Guimet.

References

AWARDS

Jury International

Cyclo d'Or

Dastan Natamam (*Story Undone*, Iran), Hassan Yektapanah

Grand Prix du Jury International

Shijie (*The World*, China), Jia Zhangke

Cyclo d'Or Special

Lee Doo-yong (Korea), director - for his entire work

Cyclo d'Or Special

Essatollah Entezami (Iran), actor - for his entire career

Prix du Jury NETPAC

Hao da yi dui yang (*Two Great Sheep*, China), Liu Hao

Prix Emile Guimet

Thoi xa vang (*Elapsed Time*, Vietnam), Ho Quang Minh

Prix Langues O'

Dastan Natamam (*Story Undone*, Iran), Hassan Yektapanah

Prix du Public

Medurat Hashevet (*Campfire*, Israel), Joseph Cedar

Prix Jury Jeunes

Hehaarug Ha-17 (*No. 17*, Israel), Documentary, David Ofek

Author Information

Ron HOLLOWAY (1933-2009) was an American critic, film historian, filmmaker and correspondent who adopted Europe as his home in the early fifties and spent much of his life in Berlin. He was an expert on the

study of German cinema and against all odds produced, with his wife Dorothea, the journal *German Film*, keeping us up-to-date with the work of directors, producers and writers and the showing of German films around the world.

In 2007, Ron Holloway and his wife were awarded the Berlinale Camera Award. Ron also received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (German Cross of Merit), Polish Rings, Cannes Gold Medaille, the American Cinema Foundation Award, the Diploma for Support of Russian Cinema and an honorary award from the German Film Critics' Association.

Ron was also a valued contributor to *Kinema* for the past fifteen years.